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Abstract

This project analyzes the affects of trauma and culture change on Cambodian refugees. The horrors Cambodians experienced at the hands of Pol Pot had a dramatic impact on the 150,000 refugees who immigrated to America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Extreme culture shock added to the difficulty these refugees had in adapting to life in America.

Traditional Cambodian culture is discussed, highlighting how Cambodians practiced religion, education, and gender roles before the war and how life afterward has changed them. Due to the vast differences between American and Cambodian beliefs and the delicate nature of the refugee state of mind, the Khmer have neither successfully continued life as they knew it in Cambodia nor fully adopted American culture.

Identity Lost:
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"To speak of Cambodian Culture is to speak of Buddhism" (Hott, 1991, Film). Every aspect of the traditional Cambodian way of life is derived from Theravada Buddhism (Welaratna, 1993, p. xvii). Buddhist teachings promote community togetherness, peace, and religious dedication in order to achieve spiritual enlightenment. This Buddhist context is in stark contrast to the culture that now surrounds over 150,000 Cambodian refugees living in the United States. Immigrating after the brutal uprising of the Khmer Rouge in 1975 and invasion by Vietnamese Communists in 1979, Cambodian refugees find themselves ingrained in a culture that promotes individuality, attainment of wealth, and drastically different religious values; and "American Culture is indeed a very powerful culture" (Hott, 1991, Film).

A combination of exposure to traumatic events and forced placement within an unfamiliar context will hinder both successful continuation of a previous culture and successful adaptation to a new one. Such change can result in collective identity confusion. Khmer Refugees in America are a specific example of this thesis. Unique among all American immigrant groups in the 20th century, Khmer did not come to the United States by choice, but as an escape from genocide. This research will focus on the American experiences of Khmer people forced from their homes in a time of war. The topics that will be covered include: a profile of Khmer refugees and problems they face regarding their trauma, lifestyle and language, education, gender roles, religion, and health. Reasoning regarding the affects of American culture specifically on the Khmer will then be further elaborated.

War and Trauma in "Pol Pot Time"

The Khmer Rouge, a militant Cambodian guerilla army led by Pol Pot, easily overthrew their country's government and took control in 1975. During their four-year occupation, the Khmer Rouge eliminated 1.5 million Khmer people, about a quarter of the population, in an effort to destroy all things Cambodian. (Welaratna, 1993, p. 1) Close to a quarter of the population was slaughtered in this genocide.

The Khmer Rouge then began what was labeled "the killing fields," during which time horrific brutality was carried out against the Cambodian population. The purpose of this brutality was to restructure Cambodian society and to destroy everything the characterized Khmer life and culture prior to their seizure of power. Through drastic measures taken against the Cambodian people, the Khmer Rouge intended to create a supreme egalitarian agrarian society patterned after the most radical strains of the Chinese Cultural revolution. (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, n.d., p.1). During the onset of the Khmer Rouge Regime, Cambodian civilians were forced to evacuate their cities to live in the rural areas of Cambodia. Hundreds of thousands of people were subjected to work in labor camps while many other civilians were executed, or died of starvation or disease.

The types of physical torture the Cambodians endured included crushing, asphyxiation, stretching, electric shock, sexual torture, beatings, burning, and removal of toenails, fingernails and teeth. Psychological torture was applied to promote the three markers of mental breakdown, debility, dependency and dread. Drugs to distort reality were also used, along with

psychological interrogation techniques that reinforced helplessness, including abusing victims regardless of their responses to questions (Barber, J. 2000, p.11-12).

After the Vietnamese military brought down the Khmer Rouge in 1979, many survivors fled the killing fields of Cambodia and headed for what they thought was safety in Vietnam and Thailand. Those who were fortunate enough to be alive to flee had just survived the brutal physical and psychological torture of the Cambodian labor camps. The journey out of the country was very harsh and dangerous and those that did make to refugee camps were once again exposed to overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Many were exposed to these additional traumas while they waited for sponsorship to come to the U.S. and other resettlement locations (Paigne, n.d., p.1).

Exposure to this horrific trauma is one reason Cambodian refugees have had a tragically difficult time living in the United States (Weinstein, 1996, p.1). Khmer Americans have tended to migrate from all corners of the United States into large communities where they can try to insulate themselves from the larger American culture around them. This has provided some degree of comfort to the adult refugees, but the cultural isolation has not helped the American-born Cambodian children function well socially or in school.

A rift develops between the generations and many Khmer parents are finding their children abandoning traditional Cambodian culture in an attempt to assimilate into the surrounding American community. Some of the children are joining gangs that are a part of their economically deprived neighborhoods, having babies out of wedlock and often leaving the

community altogether for a variety of reasons that are embarrassing to their families, This problem aggravates a fear of abandonment that the refugees have, and violates the Cambodian custom of expecting children to take care of their parents as they age (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 96). In response, many Khmer parents are clamping down on their children to try to keep them under control and within the community so that they do not lose family face and social respectability. This attempt to be kept in a cultural cave does not sit well with most Cambodian children, who want to grow up to find themselves and their place in American society. Much intergenerational friction exists in the Khmer communities over how young adult children should behave and what they should do with their adult lives (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 174).

New Surroundings: Rebuilding in America

The first refugees to reach the U.S. were mostly higher educated, urban Khmer that had managed to survive. (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 9) These people were among Pol Pot's primary targets for extermination, because they were likely employed by the previous government or capable of organizing resistance. Later immigrations contained rural families, many of whom served in Pol Pot's labor camps. Once these Khmer immigrants reached U.S. soil, they were faced with their first challenge in America, resettlement.

"The U.S. government's official resettlement policy was to disperse Southeastern Asian refugees throughout the country," (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 9). To reduce the chance Cambodians would 'overpopulate' any one region, "every state except Alaska received at least a hundred refugees," (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 9). The initial impact of this decision was profound, splitting up families and resettling them in places far from other groups of refugees. Khmer Americans

overcame this throughout the late 70s and early 80s by simply migrating within the borders of the U.S. to areas densely populated with Cambodians, such as Long Beach, California and Lowell, Massachusetts. Once Khmer people found a place to reside, the psychological impacts of Pol Pot's regime began to surface. One overwhelming result of the war was the number of single parent, female-led households that fled to America.

Traditional Cambodian beliefs typically include a male-led household with a stay at home mother. "Of the 1.5 million people who died under the Khmer Rouge, 80 percent were men between the ages of 20 and 50," (Welaratna, 1993, pgs. 2-3). Rebuilding life in America meant forgoing traditional gender roles and breaking tradition. Fortunately for Cambodian mothers, by 1980 American culture had grown more tolerant of single-parent households. Single women headed 17.7%, of all American family households (8.705 million) in 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1980, Statistical Abstract). Adapting to the American way of life would be far easier for single mothers than trying to hold on to a traditional Cambodian style. The subdued and controlled role of women in pre-war Cambodia was suddenly replaced by the empowerment and freedoms of American culture. "I wanted a job. I was on welfare which I couldn't stand, and I also didn't want to go out and buy food stamps," (Welaratna, 1993, p. 213). Besides the changing role of women as heads of households, other Cambodian beliefs grew less frequently practiced as well as a result of context.

Reflexivity is the practice of rejecting or accepting aspects of a culture based on personal morals (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 15). When beliefs learned at home, church, or school are consistently practiced and reinforced by outside influences, they are easily maintained. If different beliefs

and practices are exposed to an individual everyday, they may dismiss their previous set of beliefs and adopt new ones. Khmer Americans have struggled with reflexivity since their arrival in the U.S. Different language, education style, and religion surround the Khmer and pressure adaptation. Reflexivity comes as a result of being placed within an unfamiliar context and is a major reason for the inability of refugee families to adjust successfully in the United States. The second generation in particular is vulnerable to contextual pressure. A major source of influential pressure on the second generation comes from the American education system.

The American Education System

Education in the American school system of Khmer children has met with varying degrees of success. For the most part, the achievement level of Khmer children is at the bottom of rankings among Asian immigrant groups (Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, 2003, P. 1). Heightened fear of loss and abandonment among parents, caused by the years under Pol Pot, likely contributes to idealized expectations from children. Vast cultural differences between experiences at home and in American schools also create difficulty for Khmer children.

"Parents expect schooling... to reflect the moral training children receive at home," (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 123). In Cambodia, Buddhist values were taught at school and served to reinforce the moral and social education of children at home. As a result, parents do not expect schooling to be neutral in the areas of values and ethics. In American school systems, parents are viewed as the primary source of moral teaching, and teachers do not instill moral nor religious

values in children and therefore the education system does not reinforce the moral training Khmer children receive at home (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 124).

Most children still learn Khmer from their parents, but American teachers teach classes in English. Even though the educational system in American schools upsets them, Khmer parents wouldn't dare question the authority of a teacher (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 132). This is because Cambodian beliefs traditionally hold teachers as being equally important 'second parents' to children. They are held in high regard and are considered part of the family.

Khmer parents have carried this deep respect for teachers to America, even though many are concerned about how their children are taught. Parents praise American schools and education simply because it is polite to do so (Smith Hefner, 1999, p. 132). Their problems lie in the moral teachings their children are receiving, especially the fact that girls are taught in the same classrooms as boys. Interaction between males and females in Cambodia is minimal until marriage. "I now sit and shake hands with people, ... and hug people, and those are big changes," (Welaratna, 1993, p. 198). Parents fear these actions will promote sexual activity and reduce the purity of their daughters and inevitable loss of face. Deeper than that, parents would see it as a sign that Cambodian culture cannot survive in the U.S. They remain particularly strict with daughters compared to sons.

Although they adamantly demand that the children behave, they do not emphasize excellence in academic performance. They let their children develop at their own rate and do not usually interfere with individual academic interests and career goals. While they expect teachers to be

fully responsible for moral and academic instruction, Khmer parents take a hands-off approach in steering their children toward academic achievement and success in the American job market (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 144). Competing to succeed is not consistent with Buddhist teachings and Khmer parents do not teach their children to use education as a tool to achieving a better future and position in life.

Overall, Cambodians have come to realize that the pre-war educational style is impossible to recreate on American soil. Reinforcement of Buddhist beliefs and Khmer practices does not exist in American educational facilities. American culture has the greatest effect in high schools and Universities, when children are most influenced by peers. Fear that American influence will someday erase Cambodian culture is amplified by the vulnerability exposed during Pol Pot Time. Such uneasiness creates difficulty for both parents and children, as they struggle to find middle ground in the United States.

Buddhism meets Christianity

Khmer people have practiced Theravada Buddhism since the 14th century A.D. (Chandler, 1991, p. 79). Originally founded in Sri Lanka, Theravada Buddhism combines elements of Hinduism, Animism, Chinese Buddhism, and Brahmism. Khmer people are strongly united by this faith, as for almost 500 years, 95% of the population in Cambodia has been dedicated to Theravada Buddhism (Lobbezoo, B., 1996, p.1).

The elimination of Theravada Buddhism was a goal of Pol Pot during his occupation. The importance of karma in Buddhist teachings led many to believe they brought the tragedy and

torture upon themselves. Seeing Buddhism targeted for destruction, they may have begun to feel a sense of hopelessness. Many people may have even begun to question their faith. Even the monks, the most devoted practitioners of Buddhism, were forced to change their practices in order to survive Pol Pot time.

Monks were integral members of the Khmer faith. To this day, they are teachers, faith leaders, and most importantly icons of Cambodian tradition. In pre-revolutionary Cambodia, between 40,000 and 60,000 monks practiced Theravada Buddhism. After Pol Pot's genocide, a mere 5000 remained (Smith-Hefner, 1999, pgs. 22-23). Some of these monks were slaughtered, but most of them left the monkhood rather than face certain death. Those that have come to the U.S. have faced difficulties building temples and recruiting new monks. Young men do not seem interested in serving as monks in the U.S. beyond a brief symbolic period of a week or two. As a consequence temples in the U.S. have had to import monks from Cambodia. Many times these monks know very little about American culture outside of a few English words (Ledgerwood, 2004, Personal Interview). Besides the inherent difficulties of being moved to America, monks have also had to deal with the influence of Christianity on the Khmer population.

In 1923, several decades before the occupation by the Khmer Rouge, the Christian and Missionary Alliance sent missionaries out to Cambodia to convert the population to Christianity. These missionaries did not realize how strong the Buddhist beliefs of the people were; very few Cambodians converted to Christianity. Until the 1970s, the unity and strength of Buddhist tradition made it difficult for outside religions to penetrate Cambodia. In the post Pol-Pot refugee camps Christianity played a new role to many Cambodians, a way to escape. Among the

thousands that immigrated to the United States, Christian groups sponsored a majority, "I think for some Cambodians, conversion is not a big deal. They 'convert' but they remain Buddhist," (Hartky, L. 2000, P. 1).

The "Rice Bowl Christians" as they are referred to, still practice Buddhism, but attend Christian services out of respect for the people that have helped them survive and relocate to the United States (Welaratna, 1993, p. 232). Many of the Christian sponsors are aware that the Cambodian Christians involved with their churches are not true converts. Because most missionary groups tie conversions to assistance, many of the Khmer are affiliated with the Christian churches for aid, but are not really followers of any Christian faith. Some refugee conversions have been sincere, but in a large number of cases there were more practical concerns behind the religious conversions. Rice Bowl Christians have been lured by the opportunities for assistance in church-backed schools and social programs. Many Cambodians were baptized in the camps in the hope it would improve their chance for resettlement in the West. Given their precarious position, few required much persuasion.

In America, the impact of Christianity has been far greater. "Cut off from their roots, many Cambodians find difficulty putting down new ones. Some have tried hard to do so, however, by becoming Christians," (Smith-Hefner, 1994, p. 25) Separation from Cambodia and immersion in a predominantly Christian culture has created a pressuring influence to fit in. Buddhist monks and devoted faithful are very concerned about this fact. It shows the overwhelming power of Christian and American culture as well as the diminishment of unity among Cambodian Buddhists caused by the aftermath of Pol Pot Time.

Gender Roles

Gender related role expectations of Khmer parents for their children are one of the greatest sources of discord between Cambodian and American culture (Hopkins, 1996, P. 78). Cambodian parents and their families have traditionally been integrally involved in the selection of a marriage partner and the social and financial negotiations that follow. In the United States, Cambodian parents are sensitive to the threat that their children may stray from the Cambodian ideals concerning dating and marriage and bring a loss of face to the family. As a reaction, they pressure their children very heavily to adhere to the standards set by Cambodian culture and their surrounding community. There is a significant double standard in the courting behavior that is expected of male and female offspring (Smith-Hefner, 1999, P. 110). Males are allowed to associate with girls and even have some premarital sexual experiences. Females, on the other hand are not allowed to even associate with boys, and are not allowed out with a young man until she is engaged to him. Even after the engagement is official and has been announced to the community and the ancestors, a chaperone is sent out with the couple until the marriage takes place (Smith-Hefner, 1999, P. 159). This is in significant contrast to the outside American customs Khmer adolescents are exposed to daily at school and outside the immediate community. Khmer parents worry about the outside influence and the children resent the tight control held over them.

A very vital part of a successful wedding is a virtuous bride. The behavior of the male is also important, but not as highly scrutinized and criticized as that of the bride (Hopkins, 1996, p. 78). If there are any mistakes made, such as an out of wedlock pregnancy, the family can only expect

to have a small and somber wedding with few guests (Smith-Hefner, 1999, P. 154). Parents will also be seen as irresponsible; many friends and family will stay away to silently voice their disproval, and the family loses a great deal of face. If an unmarried girl loses her virginity and it becomes public, it can have serious social repercussions for the family (Hopkins, 1996, p. 57). The same is not true for a boy, whose exploits are considered normal and forgivable.

Social interaction of the sexes and marriage are of extreme importance in establishing family identities and social position. Intense pressure is placed on offspring, especially daughters, to save face and maintain the family social position. There is little room for autonomy or self-expression for young women, because unless they are obedient to their families and carefully follow their parent's wishes, they will be considered disobedient and a disgrace to the family. Girls are faced with the dilemma of becoming socialized in the mainstream American adolescent way of life and embarrassing their family, or following the Khmer tradition and remaining in a social cave, shut off from the activities and social events that their classmates at school enjoy (Hopkins, 1996, p.78).

In order to coerce their children into arranged marriages, parents often remind their children that as parents they are getting older and must see to it that the children are placed in marriages before they die. Khmer adults say that according to Buddhism, it is their duty to arrange for their children's future before they die. They believe that if they die before fulfilling this duty, their souls will not find release. But there is an underlying selfish motive as well, because settled children will be in a better position to care for elderly parents. One of the reasons weddings are so big is to solicit the community's help in making sure the marriage is successful. The more

people available to help, the better the chances are that the couple will be happy and able to support the parents in their old age (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 174).

Expecting this kind of reciprocity is a strain on young Khmer in America because often they meet freely outside the community and decide they want to marry. Parents want their sons to marry girls that are pure and apt to take on the role of caretaker in later years. This puts extreme pressure on girls to remain celibate and save face and status for their family so they will be good candidates for marriage (Smith-Hefner, 1999, P. 175). Khmer girls that are willing to sacrifice their freedom and autonomy in the United States are becoming more and more rare, and this causes extreme friction within families.

Cambodian women usually marry between eighteen and twenty one, while Khmer brides as young as sixteen or seventeen are common in the United States (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 181). American Cambodians are more anxious to marry their daughters off before the temptations of American life tempt them into doing something that might embarrass the family (Hopkins, 1996, P. 51). Stories and folklore about bad young people back in Cambodia are told to discourage young people, especially women, from disgracing their families. The stories are very judgmental and relay ideals that are in stark contrast to the reality of everyday life in the United States. Due to the family pressure to marry, many young women cave in and agree against their own wishes. These high-pressure weddings in the U.S. sometimes end in run away brides or suicide. Other women gather their inner strength and follow the path of many married Khmer women and develop a strong sense of autonomy within the marriage. This is characteristic of changing from

a shy bride to a strong woman with an independent attitude is common among older, married Cambodian women (Ledgerwood, 1994, pgs. 127-128).

The more Khmer American elders feel they are losing control over their children, the harder they are working to tighten their grip and keep them isolated from the temptations of the larger mixed culture around them (Smith-Hefner, 1999, P. 79). But they can't keep their children shielded from American culture when they attend school and this introduces a multitude of social pressures for both the parents and children. The parents want to hold on to traditional Cambodian gender roles and the children want to assimilate into their American social environment. As a result, many Khmer families experience conflict and pain, as their children grow old enough to make choices of their own (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 121). A blending of the cultures is what is emerging as Khmer women and men resist their parents' tight reins and make a whole new way of life that is a blend of Khmer and American culture (Smith-Hefner, 1999, p. 189).

Problems with Adapting

Khmer refugees arrived in the United States with a wealth of hardships to face. One of the most evident problems many Cambodians had was extremely poor health. "All of them arrived in very poor condition; venereal diseases, hepatitis A and B, leprosy, consequences of starvation," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 34). Malnutrition and filthy living conditions in Pol Pot's camps created a breeding ground for disease. Those lucky enough to reach America carried the physical effects from being subjected to this environment.

One of the more common problems shared by refugees was bad teeth. "The condition of people's teeth was sometimes extremely poor when the refugees arrived, and some people were in such pain that they had most of their teeth pulled," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 41). Malnutrition, hygiene problems, and physical abuse under the Khmer Rouge contributed to rapid decay and loss of teeth. In the U.S., many Cambodians desired to have these problems fixed, but the cost of medicine and dental care was typically more than they could afford (Hopkins, 1996, p. 41). This problem was shared by young and older people alike, often leading to other, more severe problems with infections.

"Many Cambodians believe... illness and death may result from social causes such as jealousy, anger, or vindictiveness," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 35). This belief led to another problem among some Khmer refugees, resistance to health care. Most healers in Cambodia were religions figures with spiritual strength; some Khmer were skeptical about western medicine and questioned its potency. In addition, they had little or no transportation to and from medical facilities and little money to pay for medical services.

Many Khmer who did seek medical attention and were able to get to a physician were unable to communicate their symptoms well. This resulted in the wrong medicine being prescribed and typically reaffirmed Cambodian skepticism of American medicine, (Hopkins, 1996, pg. 37). Some American practitioners became hesitant to treat Cambodian refugees, refusing "to prescribe critical medication because they feel that this population takes it too quickly or shares it among friends," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 37).

Though physical problems were the most visible, mental problems became a serious issue as Khmer refugees settled in the U.S. "Mental health is always an issue with victims of torture," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 38). Depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, paranoia, and other mental conditions were common problems among groups of refugees. Much like physical health care, many Cambodians were hesitant about using American mental health treatment. "The brain is the most important part of a person, the location of the soul... thus spiritual and moral problems are thus shameful," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 38). Cambodians felt that shame among their peers was a greater problem than mental sickness. On top of this, American psychologists approached them the same way they would treat other Americans (Hopkins, 1996, p. 38). Cambodians dislike being asked personal questions by strangers, so psychologists had great difficulty communicating with them.

One of the more serious conditions found among Cambodians is fear of loss. Without a doubt, every refugee in America lost at least one person they loved. "Refugees may be the neediest people of all, having lost everything and in danger of losing their very culture itself," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 1). Arriving with virtually nothing but each other, Cambodians have rebuilt their culture in America from fond memories and the burden of loss. Khmer refugees hang on to their beliefs strongly, exposing their vulnerability to loss. Parents especially are protective of their children. They are sensitive to any deviations their kids have from Cambodian beliefs. Mild to severe paranoia may result from children displaying American tendencies, such as a lack if interest in Buddhism or going on dates. Khmer have perhaps developed strictness about the way their culture is set up in America; resisting American culture not because they do not appreciate it, but because they fear their own is in jeopardy.

Social problems have also arisen among the Khmer population. Alcohol abuse, gang activity, and domestic violence have become more common in America than they were in Cambodia. "In their particularly vulnerable state, refugees may either become victims or participants in these... problems," (Hopkins, 1996, p. 1).

Depression is a major cause of alcohol abuse, and the effects of wartime Cambodia created widespread drinking problems. Domestic violence most likely resulted from traumatic experiences and anger resulting from witnessing war. Gang activity, though not well documented, exists in urban communities among Khmer. This exists among youth who are not happy with the pressures forced upon them by Khmer American parents, and because belonging to gangs is part of American culture in the poor urban environments where refugees settled in the U.S.

Conclusions

Cambodians in America have a unique constellation of characteristics: Their ancient history, their traditional culture, unfamiliarity with Western culture, and the traumatic circumstances of their flight. Given these factors, Cambodians do not seem to be adapting as rapidly or successfully as other Asian immigrants. Traditional Cambodian culture is colliding with American social culture, creating ambiguity of identity among Khmer Americans. This combination of trauma and placement in unfamiliar context has prevented what could be considered successful adaptation. "Most Cambodians have two lives. In the daytime they are American. They look American, sound American, and act American. At night they are back in

Cambodia" (Kompha Seth, 4-9-04, Interview). Almost 25 years after the reign of Pol Pot ended, the identity of Khmer Americans has still yet to be shaped. Some Khmer are dedicated to preserving traditional Cambodian culture, while others now seem eager to become American. It will continue shaping itself into a unique identity of its own, different from both traditional Cambodian and American beliefs.

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